

What is a Gospel?

The word 'gospel' means 'good news'. It is derived from the Anglo-Saxon 'god spel'. Sometimes we use the word spell to mean speak out, proclaim as in the phrase 'spell it out'.

How did the Gospels come about?

After Jesus died, rose again and ascended to heaven, there were many stories going round about him. His close friends remembered incidents that others would not have known about. Different groups of people would remember different incidents - miracles, preaching, controversies, and so on. These stories about Jesus were passed around carefully by word of mouth. This might be thought of as the 'spoken Gospel' or 'Christian Oral Tradition'.

In time, the accounts of Jesus' life and teaching were arranged and set down carefully into what are now the four written Gospels.

Are the written Gospels biographies?

We call the writer of a gospel not a *biographer* but an *evangelist* (from two Greek words meaning announcer of good news). A biographer is someone who writes about the life of a famous person from birth to death, including many personal details of character, physical appearance, personal tastes, and so on.

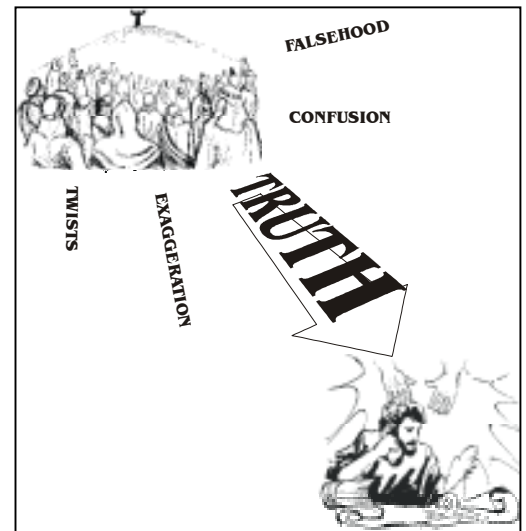
The gospels are not like modern biographies. It is surprising how many things we do *not* know about Jesus of Nazareth. Was he tall or short? What did he look like? What were his hobbies and interests? What was it like growing up in the small town of Nazareth?

Why only four Gospels?

There were other written accounts about Jesus life and deeds. Some of these may have been lost or absorbed into the four Gospels we know. Other accounts were judged to be faulty or distorted and so were not accepted by the Church.

Are the four Gospels basically the same?

You would imagine so, since they all proclaim the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Three of the gospels (St Matthew's, St Mark's, St Luke's) show similarity in content and structure. These are called the Synoptic Gospels. Synoptic means 'shared view'. The fourth gospel, St John's Gospel, is very different in style and content.



Did you know...?

What Christians call the Bible was not in existence as a collection of books until about AD. The separate books of the New Testament were written over a period of about 70 years after the Resurrection.

It then took a few hundred years of prayer, reflection and worship before the Church decided the books that were to comprise the Christian Bible. Christians believe that this decision was made under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

How do we judge that the Gospels of St Matthew, Mark and Luke are synoptic?

Many passages from these three gospels can be placed side by side so as to show their similarity. For example, in each of the three gospels there is an account of what happened when John the Baptist baptized Jesus. Judge for yourself how similar the accounts are.

Matthew 3:16-17

As soon as Jesus was baptized he came up from the water, and suddenly the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him. And a voice spoke from heaven, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on him'.

Mark 1:10-11

No sooner had he come up out of the water than he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you'.

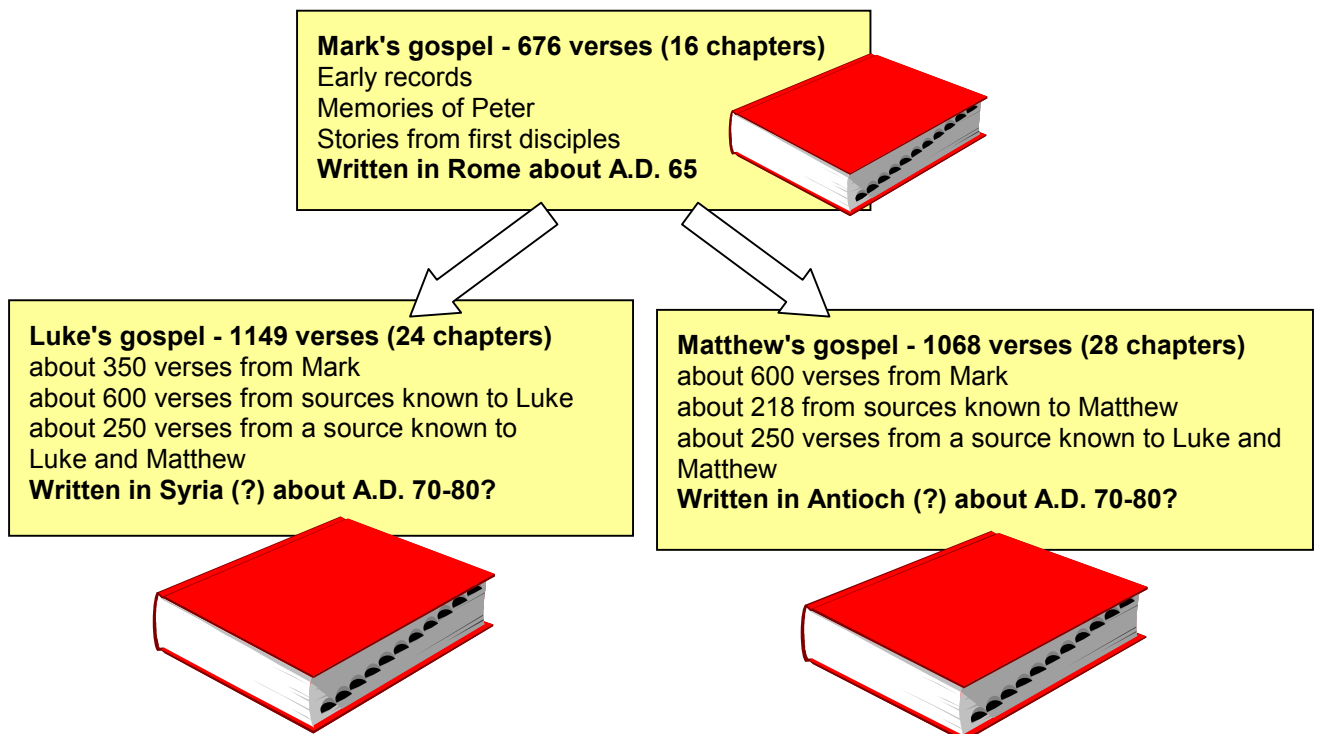
Luke 3:21-22

... and while Jesus after his own baptism was at prayer, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily shape, like a dove. and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you'.



So how are the Synoptic Gospels related to each other?

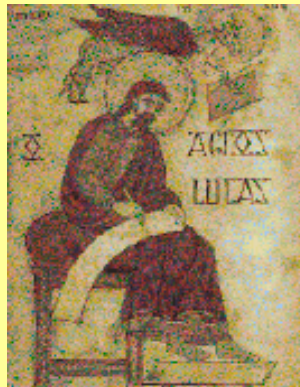
Scriptural experts are not sure. One guess is shown below.



So what's different about the gospels?

Each evangelist seems to have had a 'target audience' in mind. For example, it's thought that Matthew had Jewish converts to Christianity in mind when compiling his gospel, and Mark probably had in mind Christians of Rome who were being persecuted. The different audience leads to different concerns and highlights in a particular gospel. See the summary below.

St. Matthew's Gospel	St. Mark's Gospel	St. Luke's Gospel	St. John's Gospel
<p><i>The Apostle Matthew (Levi) is linked to this Gospel. He had in mind people who were Jewish converts to Christianity. Jesus' Jewish background and Jewish customs are explained. He includes many quotations from the Jewish Scriptures to show that Jesus was the fulfilment of God's promise to the Jews about the Messiah.</i></p>	<p><i>This very short Gospel concentrates on the last week before Jesus died. It shows how Jesus accepted suffering and won final victory over death and evil. Its main purpose was to encourage the Church in Rome which was suffering persecution. The message was to keep faith in Jesus in spite of troubles.</i></p>	<p><i>This was written by a Gentile writer for a Gentile church. It includes many stories to show that Jesus is the saviour of the whole world. St. Luke also shows how Jesus had time for the outsider, for people in society who were normally on the margins - women, the poor, foreigners, the sick and sinners.</i></p>	<p><i>The Apostle John is linked to this Gospel. There are many differences between St. John's Gospel and the other three. This is the only Gospel in which Jesus openly claims to be the Messiah. Famous sayings like: 'I am the Light of the World', 'I am the Bread of Life' are in this Gospel. This Gospel has a very 'spiritual' feel.</i></p>



Did you know...?

Each evangelist has his own symbol: St Matthew's is a human face, St Mark's is a lion, St Luke's is a calf, St John's is an eagle.

Research how these symbols came about.